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ABSTRACT

Two solutions for teaching college-level German instruction in Japan are described. The first solution is the TALK Learning System, materials designed for use in large classes. Instead of a course book, each learner has a manual in Japanese, three tool cards for each of four topics (one with dialogue patterns, a question card, and a data card), a glossary, and a tape containing the content of all cards. Using a portable tape player, students follow study tips in the manual to fulfill certain tasks, which usually lead from understanding of the content material through writing and pattern practice to a presentation in class. Students work in pairs, with three pairs working together throughout the course. The second solution, The Frankenstein Project has small student groups develop profiles of fictitious Japanese university students and present them to the class, then respond to teacher-posed questions about the profiled student's attitudes and behaviors. This leads to classroom discussion and comparison of cultural context, lifestyles, and beliefs. Contains 4 references. (MSE)

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Was gibt's Neues?
New Ideas for the German Classroom

by Alfred Gehrmann

presented at the 1997 Conference of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT)

Teaching German as a foreign language in Japan is to a very great extent textbook focused translation practice, usually taking place in classes of 40 students or more. With German being compulsory in Japanese universities until recently, students were sitting through two years of lectures on a grammar system that appeared completely impenetrable. Restructuring the curricula has made German optional in many institutions, and at last teachers must attempt to make their subject more appealing, comprehensible, and meaningful to students.

But even for those who want to change the situation, it is not easy to find methods and material serving the purpose of a modern and attractive German classroom situation. New materials and ideas on how to improve language teaching are necessary. The workshop on which this essay is based dealt with solutions for two typical problems related to teaching German in Japan.

The TALK Learning System

The size of General Education classes in Japanese Universities makes it impossible to refer to them as large groups rather than large classes. No balanced interaction between all participants on the subject being taught is possible. Rules for group-dynamic interaction do not apply. This often leads to lecturing being regarded as the only feasible approach to foreign language teaching with large classes.

Alternative ways can be found where teachers make use of the learners' didactic competence, defining their own role as a "facilitating one" (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p. 77). Following this idea, the author has worked with large classes split up in groups of four throughout the lesson. A teaching unit usually consists of two steps: first letting each group conceive a task and subsequently solve it together, and second try out and practice such a self-developed solution. It has been the author's concern so far to find, or revise and alter, existing material for that purpose (Gehrmann, 1996).

The workshop first focused on the experience teachers have made using the 'TALK Learning System German'. This material has been devised solely for the purpose of facilitating large classes. Instead of a course book, each learner has a learning set containing of the following components:

- a manual in Japanese
- three tool cards for each topic: one with dialogue patterns, a question card, and a data card

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- a glossary
- a tape containing the content of all cards.

Also, students need to bring their own walkman.

Following the study tips in the manual, the students have to fulfill certain tasks. These tasks usually lead from understanding the content of the exercise through writing practice to pattern practice. Then, students must vary the example sentences using pictures and complimentary vocabulary from the cards. Asking questions is an essential part of most exercises. There are four topics: 'Persönliches', 'Wohnen', 'Beruf', and 'Freizeit'. Students learn to have a free conversation on these topics using their own data.

As for the organization of the course, students work in pairs, with three pairs forming a group that stays together throughout the course. The study instructions from the manual are normally carried out by a pair first, before the result is presented to the other members of the group. When all members agree that the performances are sufficient, the group moves on to the next step. Each card consists of three or four working units. Having finished a working unit, the group gives a demonstration performance to another group. They receive in turn an evaluation that becomes a substantial part of the final grade, and is therefore essential for passing the course. The teacher, or rather the facilitator, gives a final evaluation by the end of the term.

Progression comes only by way of performing spoken language. Due to their experience with language learning before, students might try at first to master a step by merely memorizing or copying. They realize the insufficiency of this method when it comes to the first evaluation demonstration, at the latest.

Teachers not familiar with this way of organizing a language class might perceive working with the TALK Learning System as an enterprise with very uncertain results. Finding out the students' opinion on this way of language learning, however, can provide the teacher with plenty of encouraging feedback. Einwaechter (1995) has described course evaluation by students of English using the so-called 'TALK Self-Assessment Sheet'.

An anonymous survey among Japanese students in General Education classes for German in Kanazawa University showed results that were similar to Einwaechter. After finishing a one-year course, the students were asked to write in Japanese about their experiences, give their opinion, and also to make recommendations for improving the course. A vast majority of students wrote that they enjoyed the course, an achievement in itself regarding the feelings of boredom and frustration all too often related to General Education classes in German. Also, many students mentioned that they had been able to make friends while studying German. Then there was surprise, and expressed insecurity, too, facing the unfamiliar freedom and independence of study.

Related to this, students showed dissatisfaction with their own, or their peers' attitude towards independent studying, blaming themselves for sloppy work and asking the teacher to be more strict.

The way grammar was being taught was perceived in a lot of different ways: some students were sorry not to be taught any grammar, some students liked the course especially because of that fact. There were students, on the other hand, who wrote that for the first time ever they had come to understand how grammar is related to overall language learning. On a technical note, students preferred to have the teacher stay with their group longer at one time instead of coming and going more often for only a brief stop.

Understanding what the course was all about took a long time - so only after about three or four weeks had students realized what was expected of them. Because the material looked very simple, students underestimated the work involved. Therefore, they cited the presentation performances for evaluation as quite stressful despite the fact that the teacher was often not involved in this process.

The aim of a one year course of German using the TALK Learning System is not more, but not less then making students aware that language learning is all about communication, and that there is no virtue in silent memorizing of abstract grammar rules without any idea of practical applicability. Students who opt for continuing courses will accept a systematic four-skills approach to a foreign language as a matter of course. They also will take for granted the individual responsibility for practice, having experienced the opportunities provided by their own, and their peers' didactic competence.

The Frankenstein Project

The second part of the workshop dealt with a new concept for German conversation classes, where normally, except for the teacher, no native speaking conversation partner is available. Here, teachers are presented with the task of providing input attractive enough to have students participate actively. This frequently leads to a situation where the teacher has to do most of the talking. Students might be interested in the information provided by the teacher but are very often unable to relate to parallel phenomena in their own environment. Reasons for this are reluctance to discuss personal experiences and opinions, lack of or inexperience in using adequate vocabulary, and, in not a few cases, lack of knowledge, even about the students' own society, history, culture, and so on.

Based on this experience, the author developed for his communication classes in Kochi University a concept called the Frankenstein Project. The experiment started with the students being given the task of making a list of questions they would like to

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ask German university students. When this quite exhaustive list was finished, the students were asked to make groups of four, and within these groups develop the profile of a Japanese university student, based on the questionnaire produced by the whole class. Beginning with name, age, study subjects, and so on, students created fictitious people with highly realistic features. There was virtually no resemblance between the personalities of the characters made by different groups, as they were influenced, of course, by individual preferences, experiences, and intentions of their creators. Whereas the students were able to relate closely to most of the details, they never actually had to identify their personal relations.

The next step in the project was having one representative of the group introduce the fictitious character created by the group. Everybody had to take part in preparing the language necessary, but the actual presentation was a free talk by a single student. When the prepared presentation was over, the teacher would ask questions for clarification, and also have the student elaborate shortly on two or three details. As these questions were asked spontaneously, it was necessary for the student to improvise. Questions at this stage could be, for example: Why does he study mathematics?, or: Does she like living in the dorm?

For the next session the teacher would produce a handout containing corrections of mistakes that occurred in the presentation. Based on this, the students had to revise their work, and from here on elaborate further on details concerning their fictitious character. The next major point was: what does your student know, think, and feel, about foreign countries in general, and Germany specifically? Again, all members of the group had to participate in applying details, but only one student, chosen by the teacher, had to present the final result.

As the technical procedures of the course were clear from this point on, the teacher could concentrate on creating new stimuli, discussing with each group other features they could add to their character. The next task was to think of similarities and diversities between the student characters' perception of Germany, and their perception of their own country. This led to a twelve weeks long examination of various aspects of the fictitious characters' lives, starting with lifestyle, covering educational background and economic situation, perception of one's individual future, and in the last four weeks dealing with personal aspects of life, human relations, and beliefs.

More than once the students realized the need to be aware of phenomena and mechanisms in one's own surroundings, in order to be able to appreciate impressions from other cultural areas. They felt that in spite of their limited knowledge of German the only real problem was vocabulary, and that this deficit could be adjusted by good teamwork and thorough preparation of the presentation units. They also experienced the satisfaction of expressing in a new language content that was close to their own experience and perception of the world. The role of the teacher was mainly to ask

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questions that any foreigner interested in Japan would like to ask, and also to assist using appropriate language.

Course evaluation was based on the individual presentations given by the students. Marking corresponded roughly with the guidelines for the Goethe Institute oral exams, assessing separately the free presentation part, the interview part, communicative ability, and pronunciation/intonation.

As the 'Frankenstein Project' is still under construction, extension into a one year course is one of the possibilities presently considered. It seems that there are plenty of chances for further development. Groups could be given the task to produce a radio portrait of their character, or let their character have a personal internet homepage. This could probably lead to letting the characters operate in some kind of virtual reality, with the team pulling strings in the background.

Conclusion

Looking for new ideas in this workshop meant looking for ways to let the students contribute to the class. Second Foreign Language teaching in Japan needs proof of its applicability even more urgently than EFL teaching, where the necessity of the subject is usually agreed on in society. On the other hand, students often do not see much importance in studying German. Both the TALK Learning System and the Frankenstein Project give students a chance to apply content closely related to their environment. They put the teacher in a facilitating role, and have students use their own didactic competence. As to the aspect of intercultural education, giving students responsibility for content, progression, and even evaluation, makes them familiar with the environment their counterparts in German universities experience in their seminars.

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